

Romancing a Galleon (and Other Lost Ships) at Point Reyes Seashore

As persistent as Shakespearean suitors pursuing fair damsels unsuccessfully, since 1982 the Service, with partnership agencies and friends, has been attempting to locate and identify a 16th-century Spanish galleon and other lost ships along Point Reyes Seashore's Pacific coast. The pursuit of these illusive and ghostly fair vessels has been vigorous but as yet to no avail. The scientific suitors continue their quest in this long and dramatic tale of sailors and the sea.

Fall 1595

En route from Manila, after making landfall near today's Point St. George, California, *San Agustin* sailed south, commanded by Captain Sebastian Rodriguez Cermano, reaching a large open bay and estuary now called Drakes Bay, within the national seashore. After three months at sea, this crescent-shaped bay must have been a welcome sight! Within a few days, Cermano's crew, officers, traveling clergy, and passengers had established a shore camp, interacted with Coast Miwok people several times, and completed inland scouting trips, as his Royal orders directed. *San Agustin* was likely constructed about 1590, early in the history of Manila's colonial shipyards, from Philippine woods and materials, by local craftsmen, directed by Spanish or Portuguese masters. As reconstructed from surviving marine architecture archives, she was probably 80 feet long, about 45 feet wide, had a 14-foot draft, and was about 200 ton capacity. But no documents exist about *San Agustin's* construction or voyages before Cermano's purchase. She was likely a smaller trade vessel—or *nao*—not a larger armed Royal galleon, outfitted for battle.

San Agustin, shore camp, and entire ship's company were hit by a fierce late November storm which determined a different historical significance to Cermano's voyage. About 70 survivors did reach Acapulco seven weeks later, sailing in an open launch which had been brought to the shore camp before the storm. Official inquiries were held and testimony made regarding the loss but only a few documents about *San*

Agustin's wreck have come to light. In 1603, a second galleon—*San Diego*—was dispatched to the same bay to ascertain if any salvage was possible, as was the Spanish custom. But *San Diego* stayed only a short time and reported no evidence of the lost galleon. In maps of the late 1770s, the wreck location is noted accurately in Spanish maps of the San Francisco Bay region.

October 1982

Announced as the first interagency, interdisciplinary and scientific search for shipwrecks lost since 1595 in Point Reyes waters, the National Park Service and NOAA Marine Sanctuary Program fielded a team of archeologists, remote sensing experts, maritime historians, volunteer divers and others. Using a small Coast Guard patrol vessel and later a 1938 wooden hulled fishing boat, electronic devices were deployed to record sonar images, magnetometer readings, and acoustic profiler penetration into the submerged sands and underlying rock formations of Drakes Bay. Mapped lines of each vessel transect carrying these instruments were made from transmitted signals sent by shoreline repeaters to a moving vessel. The Bay was thoroughly covered by these instruments and magnetometer readings revealed several possible locations for sunken vessels. Divers attempted to see what may be causing anomalous magnetic readings or shadows on side scan sonar records, but little was observed.

Several historic ships were found for which informative photos, plans, or archives existed. *Richfield* (1913–1930) was an early oil tanker associated with California's petroleum industry while *Munleon* (1919–1931) a freighter, *Shasta* (1908–1939), a wooden hulled steam schooner and *Pomo* (1903–1914), a lumber schooner were studied. Several other known wreck losses, such as *Ayacucho* (1841), *Nehumker* (1867) and several lost single mast schooners were not found. Only a cluster of suspected magnetometer readings at the likely anchorage for *San Agustin* were found. In 1984, two project reports were published by NPS Submerged Cultural Resources Unit which contained available information on the lost galleon,

other vessels, and remote sensing information about Drakes Bay's maritime history.

Fall 1997-98

Fifteen years later, invigorated interest from park superintendent Neubacher and other circumstances had developed to plan field work in Drakes Bay again. Old and new partners—California State Lands Commission, NOAA's Marine Sanctuary program, San Francisco National Maritime Historic Park staff, Drake Navigators Guild, and volunteering individuals joined NPS staff at the project table. Significantly, within the 15-year period, advances in remote sensing, marine locational systems, diver-topside communication links, and diver safety (shark repellent) measures had been made. Thus, more effective side-scan sonar, magnetometer operations and data analysis, GPS locational and GIS mapping techniques, and other improvements were employed. Several investigations and salvage projects of 16th-century galleons in the Pacific Rim region had been completed which provided published comparative information from such known vessels as *San Diego* (1600 at Sebu Island, Philippines), *Concepcion* (1638 on Saipan), *Pilar Wreck* (1690 on Guam) and *Batavir* (1629 on Western Australia). More analysis of Chinese Ming Dynasty porcelain cargos was now available and a large collection of porcelain fragments from Seashore beaches and protohistoric native village sites had been accessioned by NPS staff. Data regarding magnetometer analysis by computer programs, coupled with vessel positions deter-

mined via satellite links resulted in more accurate mapping of potential 'hits' for diver investigations. A terrestrial shoreline survey of Drakes Estero to study deposition patterns for drifted materials and mapping of later beached ships' elements from *Pomo* and *Shasta* were done to ascertain the survivability of buoyant wooden vessel pieces over time. Finally, a possible location for Cermano's shore camp was investigated by the Drake Navigators Guild under an AAPA permit which authorized use of magnetometer, metal detectors, and auger tests.

These newer approaches and methods have not located *San Agustin*—she remains as elusive as ever. But during a short 15-year period, significant improvements in scientific research on submerged cultural resources give us better tools to search and locate evidence for human activities and accomplishments. The curtain has not been closed on this historical drama at Drakes Bay!

References

- Aker, Raymond 1965 *The Cermano Expedition At Drakes Bay, 1595*. Drakes Navigator Guild, Palo Rito, Ca.
- Murphy, Larry (ed) 1984 *Submerged Cultural Resources Survey Portions Of Point Reyes National Seashore And Point Reyes-Farallon Islands National Marine Sanctuary*: 1982. NPS Santa Fe.
- Carrell, Toni 1984 *Submerged Cultural Resources Inventory: Portions Of Point Reyes National Seashore And Point Reyes-Farallon Islands National Marine Sanctuary*: 1983. Santa Fe.

Roger E. Kelly is senior archeologist, Pacific Great Basin Cluster, National Park Service.

Archeological Research at the Presidio

More than 60 archeologists worked during the summer on research projects to identify and preserve cultural artifacts hidden beneath the surface of the historic Presidio of San Francisco. Excavation activities are intended to protect the park's cultural resources in anticipation of rehabilitation efforts soon to be conducted on some Presidio historic structures. Information gathered from the digs will also improve visitor interpretive services at the park.

The Presidio Trust and the University of California at Berkeley have formed a partnership to conduct archeological investigations at the park. The first project is focusing on the park's Funston Avenue, one of the most historically significant regions. Researchers are studying the area now occupied by Civil War era structures to identify the Presidio's original stone foundation built by Spanish settlers in the early-19th century.

Students participating in the Cabrillo Archaeological Technology Program are locating the foundation of the Spanish-colonial period chapel adjacent to the Presidio's Officers' Club. The Officer's Club, constructed in 1776, is the oldest Presidio building and one of the most significant historical structures on the west coast. The Trust expects rehabilitation at the Officer's Club to begin next year.

Archeologists under the supervision of the National Park Service at Crissy Field are identifying historic artifacts as part of an effort to rehabilitate the waterfront area by restoring beaches, wetlands, and a historic grass airfield. The park improvement is scheduled to be completed in summer 2000.

For more information, contact Lynn Wallace at 415-561-5300.